



## A GRANDMOTHER'S TALE

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for Continuing Education. I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball campus and your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our conversation with Suzette Sheft. Suzette Sheft is a 16-year-old student at the Horace Mann School City in New York City. She lives in Manhattan with her mother, twin brother and two dogs. She won a scholastic silver key for an excerpt of the book we're going to discuss today, *Running for Shelter*, which was her debut novel. The book is dedicated to her late father, who inspired her to write and share her family story. Suzette, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Suzette Sheft: Thank you so much for having me.

JH: I'd like to ask you to set up the backdrop for this book in relation to your own life. What drove you to write it?

SS: When I was 13, my dad unfortunately passed away. And during that summer, I found myself forgetting the stories that he used to tell me before bed each night. And because I couldn't remember them, I felt upset, especially as a writer, because I'd never taken the time to record them when I had the chance. And so this event revealed to me the importance of recording our family stories before it is too late. And I was then motivated to record my grandmother's story, so that the same thing wouldn't happen with her.

JH: Indeed, the deeply personal quality of the book comes through. And one of the really profound qualities of the book is the way in which Jewish identity plays itself out with really extreme complexity, both in your book and in your grandmother's interview with the Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, which you rely on and have described. With remarkable poignancy, your grandmother, Inge, describes her own struggle with the fact that she never pursued a Jewish identity in this very interview at the Shoah Foundation. And she asks herself, "Do I feel that I'm a traitor? And I don't really like to feel that way. Traitor for having given up on Jewish roots, because maybe it's more comfortable not being a Jew. I asked myself these

questions." And you, for your part, Suzette, capture this family dynamic in the following way, "One of the main reasons Stella divorced Ludwig was because their views on religion were contradictory. He was a proud practicing Jew. Stella, on the other hand, was legally a Jew, but she sought to leave Judaism in her past and refused to raise her daughter as a practicing Jew. Her daughter, by the way, is Inge, your grandmother. No one outside their immediate family even knew that Stella and Inge were Jewish. Even Inge didn't know." Tell us a little bit about this journey of struggling with Jewish identity.

SS: My grandmother never practiced Judaism during her childhood, mainly because her mother, whom she lived with for all of her life before the war, never really acknowledged that they were Jewish. They actually even celebrated Christmas. So once she came to America and realized that she was Jewish, I think that it did probably start to affect her. I know that she since has not practiced Judaism, but she does still keep the events of the Holocaust and World War II very close to her heart. She actually mainly reads books about Holocaust survivors and about World War II. So I think that even though Judaism isn't a big part of her life, the events of the Holocaust and World War II are extremely important factor in her life.

JH: In one of the most painful scenes, both in your book and in the Shoah Foundation Visual Archive interview that Inge, your grandmother, gave, Inge's estranged father, Ludwig, gets caught by the SS in the apartment of Inge and her mother, Stella. Stella having divorced Ludwig already a long time before that. Right then and there, in this scene, Stella, your great grandmother, disavows her ex-husband and he more or less allows himself to be taken away such that he doesn't cast suspicion on Stella and Inge. Tell us if you would about the choices to include harrowing and troubling material in the context of writing, in particular, a young adult historical novel. You didn't seem to hold back.

SS: I think that it's important for people of all ages to know what went on during the Holocaust. Of course, it needs to be told in an appropriate manner. So for example, when my great grandfather was taken by the SS, I don't make it too graphic just because I really wanted my book to be suitable for all young adult and tween ages. But I also don't hold back because, a lot of the time, people will sugarcoat the events of the Holocaust. And my grandmother was so lucky that she was never in a concentration camp, but many people were in concentration camps. And I know a lot of books about people in concentration camps usually aren't recommended for young adults. And so even though my grandmother didn't experience those harrowing events, she did experience her father being taken away by SS soldiers. So I felt the need to include that because I want all young adults to be able to understand her story.

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JH: The College Commons podcast is proud to be part of HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for Continuing Education. HUC Connect features four programs. Webinars, live conversations with social and cultural influencers on topics of civil society, arts and culture, religion, and redefining allyship. Community Connect, ready-made lesson plans for

synagogue and community learning. The Master Class, live sessions of Judaica with HUC faculty exclusively for our alumni. Enroll soon because seats are limited. And of course, the College Commons podcast, in-depth conversations with Judaism's leading thinkers. For more information about HUC Connect and all it has to offer, visit [huc.edu/hucconnect](http://huc.edu/hucconnect). And now back to our program. One of the aspects of your story is not only the question of religious identity, but also a pretty involved question about the dynamics of your grandmother's, and most of all, her mother's class identity. You write of their first real encounter with privation as they get to Lausanne, Switzerland, effectively as refugees. And you write, "Stella," this is your great-grandmother, Inga's mother, "Stella was disgusted by the reality that she would have to feed her daughter in a soup kitchen and her face turned red with shame as she watched her daughter's wide green eyes survey the room." Tell us a little bit about that experience of impoverishment after having lived a relatively privileged life.

SS: I thought that the idea of classes and also family dynamics was extremely important to my grandmother's story because she went from being an extremely privileged child to being an extremely impoverished young woman. And that had a vast effect on her life. And I think that it's important because as you go later on into the book, you see how my grandmother's status and how her class situation kind of affects her daily life. She, she graduates school at 12 years old because she wants to be able to take care of her grandmother. She starts to work on a farm because her grandmother is unable to work and they have no other ways of sustaining themselves. And so I think that I wanted to include this because this is a message for everyone about how quickly life can change during wars. I also thought the family dynamic was an interesting aspect because my grandmother and my great grandmother did not have an amazing relationship. My great grandmother was a little bit colder and she was not what we think of as a mother. And so I thought that was important to include as well because it shows how everyone has different family dynamics and how no family is the same.

JH: The theme of impoverishment and class plays itself out in many ways, including some of those relational aspects that you described. But one of the ways it plays itself out most graphically is in relation to food. I noticed that food looms large in your narrative. Did your grandmother focus on food in her interviews with you, or did you pick up on this and elaborate on it?

SS: I think it was a mix of both. My grandmother frequently described how difficult it was for her to afford even the basic necessities. And when you think of basic necessities, you think of food. And many of her stories included food. For example, she told me about the soup kitchen and she also told me about how she needed to work on the farm because sometimes they would give her free food. And the fact that my grandmother did not have food also shows the difficulties and the struggles that she encountered during the war because most people today take their food and their ability to eat hot meals for granted. But my grandmother never took that for granted and she does not take that for granted at all either as a grownup.

JH: One of the most colorful characters in your book is your grandmother's uncle, Immanuel Kupfer, Uncle Manny, as he's called. It sounds like you had a great time writing him and seemed to really enjoy his personality. Is that the case?

SS: Yes, I thought he was a great guy. I also thought that his character development was something really fascinating to write. When my grandmother initially told me about him, she spoke in a upbeat and positive manner, but she also told me how he was a little bit strict, but he was also very selfless. I remember her specifically telling me about, this is actually seen in the book, but it really stood out to me, how he spent all of his money on a ticket for her to go see a movie that she really wanted to see because he knew how much she missed her mother and how difficult it was for her to be living away from home. And I just thought that, that was really amazing because he was struggling to even afford food and to make it day-to-day. And so the fact that he gave up his whole paycheck for his granddaughter really stood out to me and really resonated with me. So I really enjoyed writing him.

JH: There's another great scene in the same vein where he gives up breakfast so that your grandmother can eat breakfast. It's really great. And by the way, I want the listeners to know there are absolutely captivating photos in the back of the book that really transport you to the time and place of the events in the book. This is a profound project of connection and as you, yourself, put it, a family story. Did this work change your relationship with your grandmother?

SS: My grandmother and I have always been extremely close. And I think that this book brought us closer, if that's even possible. It made me think of my grandmother in a new way. I always knew about her struggles during the war years, but I never really knew the true extent to them and how difficult it was for her to even get through each day. And so I think that this definitely demonstrated how resilient, perseverant, and strong she is. It made me very proud to have someone like her as my grandmother.

JH: If you could share one thing that surprised you the most in researching and writing this book, what would it be?

SS: My grandmother's mother. I never knew the extent of their relationship until I started watching the USC Shoah Foundation interview and interviewing my grandmother. And I couldn't ever imagine a mother leaving their child in order to save their self. And so that was really surprising to me. My grandmother is so warm and selfless. It was surprising to me that her mother did not treat her in the same way.

JH: Well, Suzette Sheft, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast. Congratulations on your book. And it was really a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you.

SS: Thank you so much. It was great to talk to you as well.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit [huc.edu/hucconnect](http://huc.edu/hucconnect).

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